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PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION AND MORAL KNOWLEDGE

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The idea that pictorial art can have cognitive value, that it can enhance our understanding of the world and of our own selves, has had many advocates in art theory and philosophical aesthetics alike. It has also been argued, however, that the power of pictorial representation to convey or enhance knowledge, in particular knowledge with moral content, is not generalized across the medium. Thus, in 'What photographs can't do', Stephanie Ross argues that non-narrative pictures are confined to appearances, and so cannot promote the kind of understanding necessary for moral knowledge.[1] In what follows I shall argue that Ross's claim relies on an erroneous conception of the way that pictorial representation functions. Pictorial representation can be seen to exploit knowledge of the world and of the system of representation itself, shared within the generating culture. Given that it is generally not possible for an artist to depict all that there is to depict about her chosen subject, artists commonly rely on audiences to draw on their knowledge and experience and, thereby, fill-in those aspects of pictorial content that are not being given explicitly. Thus, to be rightly appreciated, pictures often have to be seen under the light of information that the artist had reasons to regard as shared knowledge among the anticipated audience. In the case of non-narrative pictures, as I shall illustrate, this interpretive strategy allows pictorial content to expand beyond appearances, beyond the spatio-temporal fragment depicted, thus enabling moral function.

[1] Stephanie Ross, 'What photographs can't do', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1982)

In her analysis, Ross draws a parallel between photography and (19th century) realist painting, and points out that both types of representation depict a time-fragment rather than a series of events unfolding in time, and so they have non-narrative structure. That they are thus structured, Ross argues, prevents them from being vehicles for moral knowledge: the depiction of a single point in time, she contends, confines the meaning of a picture to the appearance rather than the essence of things, thus forestalling the understanding that the audience needs in order to appreciate the moral character of the represented state of affairs.

Given that moral properties are not manifest, or at least not in the way that primary qualities are, Ross explains that appreciation has to stem from an understanding of the character of the situation, action, or event that is being appreciated; which understanding entails consideration of the surrounding circumstances and the background conditions:

> Moral properties are not visible or immediately apparent like phenomenal ones. Therefore moral judgments go beyond appearances. Suppose you see a large adult hit a small child. Have you witnessed a wrongdoing, a case of cruelty? You cannot be sure until you know the background: perhaps they were playing, perhaps they were practising judo, perhaps the child is horrible and fully deserves to be hit. One does not directly see wrongness in seeing acts that are wrong, and the very same movements—the same appearance—might earn a gamut of different moral labels, given different circumstances.[2]

To evaluate a certain state of affairs one must understand how the state of affairs came to be; one needs to gain 'a sense of events, causally linked, unfolding in time',[3] as 'different stories yield different evaluations'.[4] It is this sort of understanding, typically gained from narrative works, that alone can be, for Ross, the source of art's moral value: art promotes moral knowledge not only in conveying moral judgments, but mainly in offering justification for the judgments that it conveys in the form of causes, beliefs, and reasons behind the actions and events that the judgments are about.

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[2] Ross, p. 8
[3] Ross, p. 11
[4] Ross, p. 9

That moral knowledge implies (among other things) the possibility of justified moral judgment, and that justified judgment is enabled by narrative explanation, is a widely held belief. But to get from this belief to the conclusion that a non-narrative picture cannot promote moral knowledge, one has to further accept, as Ross apparently does, that non-narrative pictures are *necessarily* confined to appearances. Ross's argument can be formalized as follows:

a) Moral knowledge regarding a represented state of affairs, presupposes (through the need for justification) understanding of the character of that state of affairs.
b) This character is determined through context and background conditions – the circumstances, reasons, actions, attitudes and beliefs which led to that state of affairs.
c) The context and background conditions of a represented state of affairs are given only in a narrative work.
d) Pictures depicting a time fragment do not have a narrative structure.
e) Pictures depicting a time fragment do not allow for the possibility of moral knowledge.

Even if one accepts all the premises in Ross's argument, the conclusion, it seems to me, does not follow. For the conclusion to follow, one more premise seems to be needed, namely that the *only* way that an audience can understand the character of a represented state of affairs is via narration. If this implicit premise were valid, and therefore could be openly included in the argument, it would follow that non-narrative pictures are necessarily confined to appearances, and so, that they cannot promote moral knowledge. But I want to deny this premise: the character of a represented state of affairs *can* be understood without narration of how the state of affairs came to be. If this is right, the fact that a picture does not have a narrative structure does not entail (not necessarily at least) that the picture is confined to appearances; that it does not allow viewers to gain, as Ross argues, any knowledge which requires a sense of events, causally linked, unfolding in time. To explain how non-narrative pictures can promote moral knowledge, one has to resort to a basic fact about systems of communication, namely the fact that shared knowledge of a system of communication and shared knowledge of the world allow for economy in discourse. Pragmatic considerations—what an audience knows about the

speaker, the subject matter, or the context in which communication takes place—commonly mediate discourse and extend meaning beyond the "letter": beyond what is being conveyed explicitly.

Pictures, both narrative and non-narrative, do not function as autonomous entities: the title of a picture, pre-existing texts or events on which the picture may draw, pre-existing pictorial works, are all contexts of information on which pictures often rely for their meaning. They all provide resources often necessary for accurate interpretation. And there are more such contexts: pictures, for instance, commonly rely on iconographic conventions; or they exploit shared knowledge about the world that they depict, for instance, the habits, customs, or social relations that it involves; or about the context of presentation; or even about the artist, her past work or ideology. In that sense, and to that extent, pictures are not self-sufficient entities. And they could not be, if only for a very pragmatic reason, implicated in Noel Carroll's remark on narrative works:

> No artist can say or depict everything that there is to say or depict about the fictional events she is narrating. She depends upon the audience to fill in a great deal and that filling in is an indispensable part of what it is to follow and to comprehend a narrative… It is for this reason that the successful author requires an audience that can bring to the text, among other things, what is not explicit in it. The author designs her work with an implicit working hypothesis about the knowledge that her anticipated reader will bring to the text, along with knowledge of how the reader will feel toward the characters.[5]

The same pragmatic constraint seems to govern pictorial representation in general: no artist can depict all that there is to depict about her chosen subject. Therefore, pictures are designed with an implicit working hypothesis about the knowledge relevant to different public domains that *anticipated* viewers will bring to a picture—for instance, knowledge of society, history, culture, politics, the institution of art, or about the system of pictorial representation itself, and the codes and practices that it involves. The public domains on which artists draw thus become contexts of

[5] N. Carroll, 'Art, narrative, and moral understanding', in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. J. Levinson (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 138-40.

information where the meaning of a pictorial representation is encoded, and which viewers would have to, and standardly *do* consider, in order to rightly appreciate a picture.

So, in responding to pictorial representations we habitually draw on, and are expected by artists to draw on, appropriate contexts of information where the meaning of a picture is encoded, as in standard cases, and for *at least* pragmatic reasons, artists rely on shared knowledge relevant to such contexts in the process of production. The claim, put forth by Ross, that a picture which aspires to the principle of instantaneity is confined to appearances, and therefore cannot promote moral knowledge, relies, I believe, on a mistaken conception of the system of pictorial representation.

To illustrate this point, let us briefly consider Manet's painting, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico* (1867). Ross regards this painting as a paradigmatic case of a non-narrative picture. According to Linda Nochlin's analysis of the painting that Ross quotes, the work embodies the realist commitment to contemporaneity: it recreates the appearance of a single moment as soldiers fire upon the emperor.[6] Realism, Nochlin explains,

> destroyed the paradigm of temporal continuity in favour of the disjointed temporal fragment. This emphasis on the temporal fragment as the basic unit of perceived experience… accompanied the elimination or reduction of traditional moral values in Realist works.[7]

But is this a causal connection? Is it the sense of time that realist works employ that diminished moral value in such works? Ross argues that it is. The depiction of a single moment, she suggests, itself prevents the understanding on which moral knowledge relies. If that were so, Manet's painting, which is clearly non-narrative, should be devoid of moral content. But this is not the case. The painting both conveys a judgment on the moral (and political) significance of the represented event, and it offers reasons for the judgment that it conveys. But to appreciate the moral content of the work the viewer has to be familiar both with cultural and historical facts and with the norms of the system of pictorial representation. The painting, as any pictorial

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[6] Ross, p. 11
[7] Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (New York, 1971), p. 31

representation, is not (epistemologically) transparent; it is not open to all viewers regardless of their perceptual beliefs and epistemic background. Rather it was created for an audience that had a certain cognitive stock to bring to their interpretation. The informed viewers would be able to fill-in the aspects of represented event that are not given explicitly: their understanding of the painting would most certainly expand beyond the depicted time-fragment, beyond appearances.

So, for instance, a viewer that could rely on collective knowledge shared in the western culture would most probably recognize in the painting the representation of an execution: the uniforms of the firing squad, their guns, the posture of the subjects, and even the watching crowd, are all *distinctive* characteristics of the situation depicted. To use an expression employed by Nochlin, the picture offers 'a significant kinetic summary':[8] not to implicate temporal order or the past, but to specify the character of the represented state of affairs; it presents information distinctive of the familiar schema of an execution - familiar to contemporary viewers and familiar to us. But in assuming the picture under the schema of an execution we already move back in time: such a schema involves that a person is killed as a punishment for her actions or beliefs, which presumably have been considered by an authority as against its interests and well-being. In recognizing the situation represented as an execution, we assume that such are the background conditions of that situation. The painting then does not present a disjointed temporal fragment: it implicates a story drawing on collective knowledge, which has guided the choices of the artist and guides the interpretation of suitably informed viewers.

Further, the painting was created in a time and in a place where the depicted execution was a major political event. Even if contemporary viewers were not able to identify the characters in the picture (from clues such as clothing for instance) the title would unequivocally point them (or us) in the right direction. Then, it would be information about the event that the viewers already had or were able to gather that would allow them to fill-in what is not being given explicitly: it would allow them to reconstruct the implicated narrative.

More importantly, a viewer familiar with the pictorial art of the time would be able to

[8] Nochlin, p. 30

recognize the significance that the artist placed upon the represented event. On the one hand the painting has a scale that was at the time reserved for historical and religious subject matter – for themes of great importance. Further it actively alludes to Goya's *The third of May 1808*, a work with which contemporary audiences would have been very familiar, and which would have for them a strong moral and political character. The contrast with Goya's painting conveys the thought that the execution of Maximilian was unjust—as was the execution of Spanish countrymen by French soldiers that had been so forcefully depicted by Goya. Manet relied on the audience's knowledge of pictorial art—knowledge that they were expected to use in their encounter with the picture—in order to accentuate his stance on the moral significance of the represented event. But the artist did not do just that: he further provided the audience with an explanation behind his stance. Manet did not just condemn the execution of the Emperor, he further expressed an indictment on imperialist France via the executioners' costume (the Mexican executioners appear wearing French uniform), which was actually the reason why the painting was banned from the Paris Salon. The choice of uniform is here a device for the justification of the moral stance that the artist conveys—a device though that can perform its function only against the cognitive background that the artist presumed his contemporaries to have: a background that involves knowledge of historical fact; of dressing codes; even of the regularity in realist painting that wants purposive deviations from actual fact (here the detail of costume) to have significance.

So in the case of *The Execution*, and counter to Ross's claim, the sense of time that the work employs is not an impediment to moral function: the painting—seen in the light of information that the artist had reasons to regard as shared knowledge among the anticipated audience—conveys an evaluative perspective on the represented event, but also, and more importantly, it offers reasons for that perspective, thus promoting moral knowledge. Ross's objection to the moral value of non-narrative pictures is thus counteracted by the fact that pictorial representation does not function as an autonomous system; it commonly exploits knowledge that is shared in the generating culture: knowledge about history, society, politics, culture, religion, or about the system of representation itself. Supplemented by the appropriate information—information about different public domains that the artist anticipated her

contemporaries to possess—a picture can transcend appearances; and, when needed, it can convey (and perhaps even defend), moral judgments. This, I believe, is the case regardless of the sense of time that a picture employs.